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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 005649

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GALIB'S PEOPLE REACH OUT TO EMBASSY TO PROCLAIM HIS INNOCENCE

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reasons para 1.5 b, d.

1. (C) Summary. Two senior figures in Prof. Galib's Ahle Hadith group assured us that perceptions that their leader supports violence and terrorism are false and the work of Jamaat Islami and the leftist media. They requested regular Embassy contact and invited us to visit their headquarters and madrassas. End Summary.

2. (C) On November 18, RLA and FSN Political Specialist met for more than two hours with Baharul Islam, Executive Committee member of Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB), and Sakawat Hossain, the editor of the AHAB magazine "At Tahriq." AHAB is an Islamic fundamentalist organization with international connections that is led by Dr. Muhammad Asadullah Al Galib, a Rajshahi University professor of Arabic who has been under arrest since February on charges that he aided and abetted terrorism by inciting his followers to violence against two Bangladeshi NGO's. The northwestern district of Rajshahi borders India and is the home base of self-proclaimed Islamist warriors Bangla Bhai, who heads Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), and Abdur Rahman, operational commander of the Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB). The BDG banned both groups in February, and JMB has taken responsibility for an escalating campaign of violence and threats against primarily judges that began with the August 17 nationwide bomb blasts. According to DGFI, NSI, and other observers, Galib is the spiritual adviser of Bangla Bhai, Abdur Rahman, and their largely Ahle Hadithi followers.

3. (C) According to Baharul, who did most of the talking, Al Hadith seeks to preach true Islam and "correct" the impurity in the traditional Islam practiced in Bangladesh. The sect believes that Allah's word can be found directly in the Koran and the Hadith, and that imams are not needed to interpret the text. Baharul stated that Ahle Hadith has 30 million followers in Bangladesh who are attracted to its message of equality and of subservient only to Allah. (Note: Other estimates put Ahle Hadith adherents at a small fraction of that figure, sometimes as few as one million. Baharul stated his estimate was based on unspecified adjustments to a 1989 Ahle Hadith-conducted census.)

4. (C) Baharul said that Ahle Hadith is a religious group with no interest in politics. However, because of their large following and liberal interpretation of "Jihad" or holy war, which does not mean violence, militant Islamic groups have targeted them for character assassination. In terms of religious philosophy, AHAB is closest to those groups gathered under the banner of Islami Oikya Jote, a member the ruling coalition but without Cabinet representation. Baharul claimed that another BNP coalition member, Jamaat Islami (JI), has mislead the BDG on Ahle Hadith's activities because AHAB's large membership and doctrinal "purity" are a threat to JI's authority. JI, he said, also suffers from the stigma of being "a collaborator" with the Pakistanis in the 1971 Independence War, and that its reputation for opportunism was further enhanced by its prior alignment with the Awami League (AL). While AHAB supported BNP in the last election, it might support the AL in 2007 because, Baharul claimed, neither AHAB nor its followers were harassed or imprisoned by the AL government as has happened under BNP.

5. (C) AHAB does not support the activities of violent extremist groups like JMB or JMJB, Baharul insisted. When asked why JMB threatens to bomb government offices if AHAB leader Galib and some of his fellow AHAB detainees are not released, Baharul blamed a leftist secular press for publishing false reports to tarnish Galib. He asserted that Galib does not believe that "jihad" justifies violence but that it is a spiritual fight. Galib met Abdur Rahman one time but he does not believe in the violent conduct of Bangla Bhai or JMB. Baharul recounted a horrendous death at the hand of Bangla Bhai's followers. Furthermore, he stated, two disgruntled former members of AHAB are trying to tarnish AHAB's image by portraying it as an extremist group. One is the group's former treasurer, Rezal Karim, who was expelled for embezzlement. The other is Shafiqul Islam, Assistant Registrar at Rajshahi University, who was sacked as Director of AHAB's Computer Center. Shafiqul is a former journalist who has used those connections to discredit AHAB and especially Galib, Baharul said.

6. (C) RLA inquired why AHAB does not combat these allegations of terrorist involvement more strenuously.

Baharul responded that they have tried without success with the press and are now trying to reach out to the international community, which is why he wanted to meet with the U.S. Embassy. (Note: This meeting stemmed from a request from RLA to AHAB for court documents on the various cases pending against Galib. Five out of 11 cases have been discharged by either judges or the Ministry of Home Affairs for lack of evidence, and RLA wanted the documents to assess the judicial reasoning and determine what gaps, if any, may exist in current laws addressing terrorist conduct. The two men did not bring the documents but said they would get them to RLA.)

17. (C) AHAB is led by a 13-member executive committee, Baharul explained. Currently only seven are active because of death, illness or imprisonment (i.e., Galib and two others). After this, there is a 240-member consultative committee and four levels of committees starting with units in 42 of Bangladesh's 65 districts and going down to the village level. AHAB operates five madrassas and orphanages, mostly in the northwest, and a medical clinic in Kushtia. The only time Baharul was hesitant in his responses was when he was asked about AHAB's funding. He said money came from individuals in Saudi Arabia but that AHAB was not influenced by that country's Wahabi teachings. He said they were rather "salafis" meaning followers of the Koran and authentic Hadith. He added that a "few NGOs" also contribute, including previously the Kuwait-based Islamic Heritage Revival Foundation. (Note: The BDG has frozen IHRF's local accounts because of its contributions to AHAB.)

18. (SBU) Baharul said AHAB would welcome American English teachers at its madrassas for males and females. Women, he stated, should be able to work because they can contribute to a family's well being. He invited Embassy officers to visit AHAB offices and madrassas in Kushtia and Rajshahi.

19. (C) Comment: The cordial meeting was conducted largely in Bangla. We take with an enormous grain of salt most of Baharul's statements, especially on Galib's alleged aversion to violence and AHAB's membership size. However, the animosity between Ahle Hadithis and JI is well known, which was a major reason given last February for the BDG's willingness to crack down on Galib, JMJB, and JMB. Still, it is interesting that Galib's group is reaching out to us, which might be a sign of desperation. We are looking to take advantage of AHAB's invitation to visit their facilities in December in combination with an attempt to meet with Galib's colleagues at RU's Arabic Studies Department and other area Islamists.
CHAMMAS